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PREDESTINATION: A SCOTTISH PERSPECTIVE[1]

by The Rev. Professor David A. S. Fergusson

In contemporary Scottish culture the subject of predestination is guaranteed to evoke a variety of reactions ranging from horror and disgust on the one hand to laughter and ridicule on the other. It is viewed by some as a nightmare scenario devised by Christian theologians in their worst moments, while for others it is a ludicrous aberration of the medieval and Reformation mind. It is perceived frequently as the trademark of a theological mindset which is marked by harshness, legalism and a fatalistic attitude towards life. A clear example of this is Edwin Muir's biography of Knox which writes vitriolically of the oppression and tyranny of the predestinarian religion that was imported from Calvin's Geneva.[2]

Yet the doctrine of predestination was not invented by Calvin and Knox at the Reformation. Its roots lie deep in Christian theology and in the Scriptures, and a brief description of this historical background is called for if its impact in Scotland is to be accurately gauged.

In the early centuries of the Church, theology was marked by an emphasis upon the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom, largely to combat Stoic determinism and astrological fatalism. The freedom of the Christian under the rule of God's providence represented a release both from the grip of an impersonal fate and the hazards of random fortune. This happy conjunction of human freedom and divine prescience is found in Justin Martyr's First Apology

[1]A revised version of an inaugural lecture delivered at Aberdeen University on 5th March 1991.

[2]*John Knox: Portrait of a Calvinist* (London, 1930), pp. 99–121. The two best known statements of hte doctrine of predestination in Scottish culture are probably the third chapter of the Westminster Confession (1646) and its parody in Holy Willie's invocation (1784). Robert Burns, 'Holy Willie's Prayer', *Poems and Songs* ed. J. Kinsley, (Oxford, 1969), p. 56.

(C150).[3] God's control over the future is determined by a foreknowledge of human choices, and the divine election is in part a function of this foreknowledge. In other words, the manner in which God will determine and govern a human life is fixed by an awareness of the ways in which freedom will be exercised. This position seems to have been the dominant one in the Eastern Church since the early centuries, and it contrasts sharply with the view that we find in Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and the Reformers.[4]

Augustine, in his early work on the freedom of the will, presents an account of divine foreknowledge and human freedom which is essentially the one we find in Justin Martyr. It is significant that this is an anti-Manichean writing rather than an anti-Pelagian treatise. Here the foreknowledge of God rather than threatening human freedom instead guarantees it, by the fact that the sure object of God's foreknowledge is the spontaneous action initiated by the human will. By perceiving how I shall exercise my freedom God's foreknowledge is not only compatible with freedom but demands it.[5] There is in this writing little discussion of whether God can influence or determine the freedom of the will but the philosophical account of freedom seems to leave this possibility open. A free action is simply a voluntary, spontaneous action which is determined inwardly rather than coerced outwardly. If the grace of God should move the will inwardly then human freedom could be made to serve divine sovereignty.

This possibility is realised in the midst of the Pelagian controversy where we find Augustine so radicalising the theology of grace that a strong doctrine of predestination inevitably ensued. Against Pelagius and his followers, Augustine insisted that the will can only incline towards God if it is first released from the ancient bondage of sin. The innermost springs of the

[3]'First Apology', Chapter 44, *The Writings of Justin Martyr and Athenagoras* (Edinburgh, 1897).

[4]The Longer Catechism of the Russian Church states that 'As he foresaw that some would use well their free will, but others ill, he accordingly predestined the former to glory, while the latter he condemned.' *The Doctrine of the Russian Church*, ed. R. W. Blackmore (London, 1845), p. 55.

[5]'On Free Will' in *Earlier Writings*, (Library of Christian Classics, London, 1953), Book III, pp. 174ff.

will are corrupt and tainted by the power of evil, and only a redemption which is sufficient to convert the will can cause a man or a woman freely to will what is good. The prevenient grace of God must first work upon the human will prior to conversion and Christian living. If some receive while other resist the gospel, the only theological explanation is that God has decreed that a portion of human beings shall come to the heavenly city to make good the number of angels that have fallen. Thus the doctrine of grace that is forged in the heat of the Pelagian controversy has as its by-product a strong doctrine of predestination.[6] Divine election instead of tracking foreknowledge, as it does in Justin Martyr, now becomes sovereign. The foreknowledge of God ceases to be a function of human freedom and becomes instead a function of predestination.[7]

Despite its attempt to underline the prevenience of God's sovereign grace we can identify several difficulties with Augustine's doctrine of predestination. It seems to reach the conclusion that God has saved some and passed over others through the observation that some men and women respond to the call of the gospel while others fail to heed it.[8] Yet this does not seem to be the basis upon which the Bible presents the idea of divine election. The election of Israel and the Church is predicated upon the freedom and love of God. The scope of God's love is not to be determined by observation of human choices. The focus of the theme of election in Deuteronomy is exclusively the mystery of God's free grace. In Augustine, however, the doctrine of predestination seems to function at times as an explanation of why some believe and others do not.

A further difficulty concerns his understanding of the freedom of the will. In philosophical parlance, Augustine is clearly a soft determinist or a compatibilist, insofar as he

[6]'On the Predestination of the Saints', *Anti-Pelagian Writings* (Edinburgh, 1876), Volume III, Chapter 11.

[7]For a discussion of the relation between freedom, grace, foreknowledge and predestination in Augustine see G. R. Evans, *Augustine on Evil* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 112–149.

[8]This criticism is made by Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, ed. G. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, (Edinburgh, 1957), pp. 16 & 307.

asserts the compatibility between causal necessity and voluntary action. The freedom of the will is compatible with internal causal determination of human action. A voluntary action is to be explained by the necessity of internal conditions rather than external conditions. This enables Augustine to square divine sovereignty with human freedom, but we might note in passing that if the theologian desires an alternative libertarian account of freedom then she may have to adjust the account given of divine sovereignty.

The greatest difficulty in Augustine's position, however, concerns the morality of his doctrine of predestination. It began by undergirding an account of divine mercy but it ends by presenting the ultimate decisions of God as capricious and inscrutable. Why some are chosen and others passed over cannot be explained solely by grace but only by an appeal to the mysterious justice of God. We find Augustine having recourse here, as High Calvinists later did, to the aesthetic consideration that the balance of gracious redemption and righteous damnation is a majestic testimony to the variety and order of created reality, and *a fortiori* to the glory of the Creator.[9]

It was no coincidence that when the Reformers restated Augustine's radical doctrine of grace there was a corresponding retrieval of the doctrine of predestination. In his dispute with Erasmus, Luther argued for the sovereignty of the free God over the operation of the human will. In characteristically stark language he presented the metaphor of the will as a beast that can be driven by either God or Satan.

> If God rides it, it wills and goes where God wills ... If Satan rides it it wills and goes where Satan wills; nor can it choose to run to either of the two riders or to seek him out, but the riders themselves contend for the possession and control of it.[10]

The upshot of this understanding of divine grace and its

[9] *City of God*, Book XI, Chapter 23. Cf. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London, 1966), pp. 88–95.

[10] Luther and Erasmus, *Free Will and Salvation*, (Library of Christian Classics, London, 1969), p. 140.

relation to the human will is a doctrine of predestination in which the earthly life and the eternal destiny of a human being are determined by the decrees of God.

While this doctrine of predestination is apparent in Luther, it played a more significant role in the theology of Calvin and his followers. Calvin was clearly troubled by the doctrine but his conviction that it was the corollary of the *sola gratia* principle and the plain teaching of Scripture constrained him to face it in typically robust fashion. Calvin indeed did not shrink from the double aspect of predestination. If God from all eternity has by grace elected some for salvation, we cannot but conclude that God has rejected all others. This conclusion is demanded by the particularity of election and the sovereignty of God.

As a doctrine that is taught by the Church, however, it is to be handled with caution and circumspection. Its primary purpose is to act as a source of confidence and comfort to the believer. It provides us with the assurance that our destiny is safe in the hands of God, and that the divine providence is neither too remote nor impersonal to care for all God's children. Despite the fragility of earthly circumstances, the political turbulence of sixteenth-century Europe, and the frailty of human moral endeavour, the doctrine of election could witness to the compassionate and certain rule of God. This is the idea of predestination at its best, yet its shadowside was never far away. The immutable decree of reprobation cannot easily be forgotten once thought of, and Calvin's opponents argued that if God's sovereign decrees were eternal and unchangeable then the fall of Adam must have been predetermined.

Calvin defended his corner resolutely but, like Augustine, before him, he was driven into a harsher and more forthright exposition of predestination. In the final edition of the *Institutes* and in the essay against Pighius, the double aspect of predestination is given further weight.[11] The sovereignty of

[11] *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill (Philadelphia, 1960), Book III, Chapters XXff. *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, ed. J. K. S. Reid, (London, 1961).

God implies that God cannot remain passive in permitting the Fall and the damnation of many. God wills that these things come to pass that the divine glory may be fully revealed. Thus he quotes Proverbs 16.4. 'The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.'[12]

The theology of Calvin provides the background to the Scots Confession of 1560, and to John Knox's long treatise on the subject of predestination.[13] The Scots Confession, written in haste, produces a strikingly evangelical exposition of election. In Article VIII, it is presented in the context of a discussion of the person and work of Christ. Election is to be understood in the light of the Son of God's becoming one with us, flesh of our flesh, and bone of our bone. The love of Christ is the surest sign of our election.[14] The implication of this treatment of the subject for later Scottish theology ought to have been that the only decree the Christian can speak of is the one disclosed in the face of Jesus Christ. The election of grace would then have been grounded in the events which constituted the Christian Church, and which were seen as the vital clue to the mystery of the universe. There would have been no hidden and inscrutable double decree behind the crucified and risen Christ, and no terror of an irrevocable exclusion even for those who trusted in him. It was this Christological dimension of election which Barth claimed was without parallel in the other Reformed confessions, and which he specifically commended in his Aberdeen Gifford Lectures.[15]

Yet the Scots Confession does not entirely escape the errors of double predestination. The same Article VIII implies that Christ was not given to be the brother of the reprobate nor

[12] *Ibid.*, III. 23. 6.

[13] It should not be assumed, of course, that pre-Reformation thinkers in Scotland had not wrestled with theological and philosophical problems relating to the doctrine. For a discussion of the work of John Ireland and William Manderston see Alexander Broadie, *The Tradition of Scottish Philosophy* (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 12–19, 52–73.

[14] The Scots Confession, *Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches*, ed. P. Schaff (New York, 1881), pp. 444ff. For a helpful analysis of the theological context of the Scots Confession see W. I. A. Hazlett, 'The Scots Confession 1560: Context, Complexion and Critique', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 78, 1987, pp. 287–320.

[15] *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God* (London, 1938), pp. 68–79. Cf. *Church Dogmatics* II/2, op. cit., p. 308.

God their Father, and this disjunction is confirmed by the implacably hostile tones of the Confession toward the enemies of the Protestant Reformation. We have here something approaching an ideology of hostility in which the opponents of the Confession are seen as the willing instruments of Satan who threaten the existence of the visible Church on earth. The suspicion arises that the doctrine of predestination serves this ideology and is thus seriously abused. The violence and precariousness of the times doubtless go some way towards explaining this, but they cannot provide a justification for so sharp a distinction between the elect and the reprobate.

Knox, the principal architect of the Scots Confession, deals in his own writings with predestination, and the sheer length of his treatise is itself a foretaste of the dominance that the doctrine was to have a later Calvinism. Knox responds in detail to a series of charges brought by Anabaptists and others against Master Calvin.[16] The sovereignty of God is robustly affirmed; the inscrutability but certainty of the decrees are emphasised; hardness of heart is the effect rather than the cause of reprobation; and, in response to the charge on antinomianism, we are directed to the signs of election in the moral and spiritual qualities manifest in the lives of the chosen. In retrospect, it is easy to see the danger inherent in this manoeuvre. The attention of the believer is subtly redirected from the grace of God to the virtues of her own life, and, instead of being taken out of herself by acknowledging the glory of God, she is not turned inwards.

In the years after the Reformation, Scottish theology continued to be strongly influenced by the development of Calvinism on the continent. (It is hard to think of a period when Scottish theology has never been strongly influenced by European theology.) The American historian, David Weir, has argued recently that the rise of convenant theology throughout Reformed Europe was in large measure an attempt to elucidate the execution of the divine decrees in history by

[16] 'On Predestination in Answer to the Cavillations by an Anabaptist', *Collected Works V* (Edinburgh, 1861), pp. 208ff. For a discussion of this see J. S. McEwan, *The Faith of John Knox* (London, 1961), pp. 63–79.

reference to the distinction between the covenent of works and the covenant of grace. By distinguishing yet relating these covenants, the federal theologians sought to explain the justice of the decrees, while also making sense of the tension found in Scripture between God's mercy and wrath.[17] Federal theology was thus dominated by the double predestinarian scheme and the history of the covenants as the temporal outworking of the decrees. A fine example of this theology can be found in the work of Robert Rollock, the first Principal of Edinburgh University, in the late sixteenth-century.

The Synod of Dort which met in 1618–19 was not exclusively a Dutch affair as it contained representatives from other Reformed Churches, and its influence quickly became apparent in the writings of Scottish theologians. The Canons of Dort came down firmly against the libertarianism and synergism of the Remonstrants,[18] and, in Scotland, David Dickson and Samuel Rutherford wrote polemical treatises in condemnation of Arminianism. The same was included in most roll-calls of heresies.[19]

It was against this theological background that the Westminster Confession was framed and subsequently interpreted by the General Assembly in Scotland. The Confession was a document produced in England at the behest of an English Parliament for the sake of doctrinal and ecclesiastical uniformity throughout the British Isles. Ironically, its influence was marginal in England but extensive in Scotland and the USA where it still has confessional status. It is a mistake to see the Westminster theology as presenting the doctrine of double predestination in its most uncompromising form, as within certain limits the Confession ought to be regarded as a temperate consensus document. The order and language of the Confession reflect the articles drawn up by Archbishop Ussher

[17] *The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth Century Reformation Thought* (Oxford, 1990), p. 100.

[18] 'The Five Arminian Articles AD 1610' and 'The Canons of the Synod of Dort AD 1619' are found in P. Schaff ed., *Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Church* (New York, 1882), pp. 545–597.

[19] For a discussion of the influence of the Synod of Dort in Scotland see G. D. Henderson, *Religious Life in Seventeenth Century Scotland* (Cambridge, 1937), pp. 77–99.

of Dublin which were adopted by the Protestant Church in Ireland in 1615. These articles precede the Synod of Dort, and the debates of the Westminster divines reveal the manner in which they did not wish to commit themselves explicitly to the findings of Dort.[20] While the doctrine of double predestination and the covenant scheme are clearly set out, the Confession leaves open several questions. (a) Its language does not commit it explicitly to supralapsarianism over against infralapsarianism, as it does not explicitly present the decrees as logically preceding the occurrence of the Fall. Significantly, in Chapter III, the words 'to bring this to pass, God ordained to permit to fall' were amended to read 'they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ'.[21] (b) In a similar manner, the doctrine of a limited atonement is not explicitly taught and the Confession can accommodate the old medieval formula that the death of Christ is sufficient for all but efficient only for some. (c) Furthermore, there is no definite symmetry between election and reprobation as the elect are 'predestinated' while the reprobate are 'foreordained'. The language of the Westminster theology (especially the Larger Catechism) oscillates freely between decree (singular) and decrees (plural), and it maintains that 'this high mystery of predestination' is a doctrine becoming of 'humility, diligence and abundant consolation'.

The claim that the Confession is a moderate statement of federal Calvinism permitting some latitude of interpretation is therefore not without justification. But in terms of its fundamental theological framework it is more patient of a reading committed to supralapsarianism, the symmetry of election and reprobation, a limited atonement and a soft determinist account of human freedom. This, at any rate, was the position to which one of the Scottish commissioners, Samuel Rutherford, was driven. Rutherford was one of the most gifted and internationally reputed theologians of his day, but through the rigours of his systematic theology we have a breathtakingly stark treatment of predestination. His supralapsarian scheme

[20]A. F. Mitchell, *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Edinburgh, 1874), pp. 46ff.

[21]*Ibid.* pp. 151–152.

affirms that the decision to create and to permit the fall of the human race into sin was so that the decrees of election and reprobation might be brought to pass and the divine glory revealed. Creation and Fall were thus means to the end of predestination; sinners to save and sinners to punish are necessary for the manifestation of divine mercy and justice.[22]

The difficulties with federal Calvinism have recently been pointed out by James Torrance and others. It tends to subordinate grace to nature; it renders the justice of God essential but the love of God arbitrary; it yields a theory of limited atonement which is contrary to the plain sense of Scripture and which is divorced from the doctrine of the incarnation; and it fosters an introspective and legalist religion as the search for the signs of election is redirected away from Christ to the life of the individual believer.[23] It is worth noting in this context, however, that all these problems arise because the doctrine of double predestination is the cornerstone of this theology. Once it is in place, the other *loci* of federal Calvinism make good sense, and if the system is to be challenged it must be in terms of its predestinarian scheme.

Rutherford's supralapsarianism, precisely because of its rigour and consistency, brings into focus all that is perverse in the High Calvinist doctrine of predestination. The insistence that the decrees must logically precede the divine decision to create and to permit the Fall impugns the justice of God. Legal theorists have been known to argue for the principle that the punishment should fit the crime but no-one, as far as I am aware, has attempted to argue that the crime should be made to fit the punishment. If it is replied that divine justice is not to

[22]E.g. *The Covenant of Life Opened* (Edinburgh, 1655), p. 14; 'Rutherford's Catechism', *Catechisms of the Second Reformation* (London, 1886), ed. A. F. Mitchell, pp. 161–242. For discussions of Rutherford's supralapsarianism see, James Walker, *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland 1560–1750*, (Edinburgh, 1872), p. 50; M. C. Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh, 1985), pp. 70–91.

[23]J. B. Torrance, 'Covenant or Contract', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 23, 1970, pp. 51–76; 'The Covenant Concept in Scottish Theology and Politics and Its Legacy', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 34, 1981, pp. 225–243; 'Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology, *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today*, ed. A. I. C. Heron (Edinburgh 1982), pp. 40–54. Cf. The survey of the Scottish theological tradition in the 'Report of the Special Commission on Baptism', *Reports of the General Assembly*, 1958, pp. 686–762.

be reduced to human justice, the rejoinder must be that, according to Scripture, God is more just and merciful than we are, not less (Matt 7: 9–11). Ironically, Rutherford in his political writings championed justice for the people in the face of the sovereignty of the monarch, whereas the justice of God was seriously perverted by his supralapsarian theology. It is difficult to underestimate the violence that this theological scheme does to the Christian message.

A further line of defence might appeal to the manner in which the Westminster theology unequivocally affirms the natural liberty of the will and the responsibility of men and women for their actions.[24] The intention of the Confession is that human actions are to be classified under those secondary causes which serve and bring about the primary cause, namely God's eternal decree.[25] Yet it is not clear that this appeal to the liberty of the will can buck the problem of the morality of predestination, since the theory of liberty presupposed is one that must be compatible with the divine determinism of the will. Liberty must thus be circumscribed in order to accommodate divine sovereignty. It is no coincidence that a similar account of the freedom of the will was adumbrated about a century later in Scotland by David Hume, not in order to safeguard divine sovereignty, but in order to affirm the sovereignty of the social sciences. For Hume, liberty and necessity had to be reconciled to bring human actions under the sway of psychological laws, and hence to render them amenable to scientific explanation.[26]

Having examined the theological difficulties surrounding the seventeenth-century doctrine, we can move rapidly through the next two centuries before examining it in more recent times.

While the *de facto* authority of the Confession was eclipsed during the years of Moderate ascendancy in the eighteenth-

[24] *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XI.

[25] 'Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.' *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter V.

[26] 'Of Liberty and Necessity', *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Selby-Bigge, (Oxford, 1975), pp. 80–103.

century, there was little by way of attempt to modify or to remove its *de jure* authority in the Church. Outside the Secession Church there may have been few attempts to defend the entire theological scheme of federal Calvinism but we find few writers explicitly attacking it. Wotherspoon could complain of the way in which it was fashionable to sneer at the Westminster theology, but Principal Robertson, the leader of the Moderate party, believed that it was expedient not to tamper with the Church's confessional standards. In this atmosphere of confessional stalemate little of significance was achieved in theology. Scottish churchmen may have been prominent amongst the *literati* of the Enlightenment, and may have produced distinguished work in the fields of history, philosophy and literature, but it is a startling fact that the Scottish Enlightenment produced no theologian of international reputation.[27]

The end of the eighteenth-century and the beginning of the nineteenth witnessed the close of Moderate ascendancy and a renascent Evangelicalism. With it there arose renewed allegiance to the theology of the Westminster standards and this was particularly true of the Free Church in the years following the Disruption. Thomas Chalmers stoutly defended the Calvinist tradition in face of increasing opposition. Our old theology, he argued, has been responsible for the cultivation of moral virtue and human excellence. If there is a spirit of melancholy and gloom in Scotland it is arguably the result of a century 'of withering and dreary Moderatism' which has replaced the true evangel.[28] It is significant that this defence of Calvinism comes at the end of Chalmers' treatment of predestination. He argues for the traditional doctrine on familiar grounds. Philosophical necessity is the secular counterpart of divine predestination. Everything that happens must do so in accordance with God's foreordained plan. There is no self-

[27]For further discussion of this period see A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church 1688–1843* (Edinburgh, 1973), pp. 64–113; Friedholm Voges, 'Moderate and Evangelical Thinking in the later Eighteenth Century: Differences and Shared Attitudes', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, 22, 1986, pp. 141–157; Richard B. Sher, 'Literature and the Church of Scotland', *The History of Scottish Literature*, Vol. 2, 1660–1800, ed. A. Hook, (Aberdeen, 1987), pp. 259–272.

[28]*Institutes of Theology*, II, (Edinburgh, 1849), p. 366.

determining power in the universe for this would be to admit 'the dominion of a wild and lawless contingency'.[29] The decrees of God unfold through secondary causes which bring about the salvation of the elect and the damnation of the reprobate.

> Those whom God hath ordained to eternal life He also ordains to the character that is meet for it... And in contrast with this, does it not appear, as if upon those who are objects of an adverse predestination, He puts forth a contrary operation – not softening but hardening?[30]

It is this revival of the Westminster tradition which provides much of the historical background to James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). Hogg's novel, at least on one level, can be read as a reduction to moral absurdity of the doctrine of double predestination, and as an exploration of its most nightmarish possibilities. Although no Scottish theologian had ever approached the views of young Wringhim, the novel nonetheless sets out the deep moral ambiguity of the Augustinian-Calvinist doctrine of predestination.

> I conceived it decreed, not that I should be a minister of the gospel, but a champion of it, to cut off the enemies of the Lord from the face of the earth; and I rejoiced in the commission, finding it more congenial to my nature to be cutting sinners off with the sword, than to be haranguing them from the pulpit, striving to produce an effect, which God, by his act of absolute predestination, had for ever rendered impracticable.[31]

As Hogg was writing his novel, theologians were beginning to make the first serious onslaughts upon the Westminster theology. John McLeod Campbell was troubled by the effects it was having upon his congregation in the Parish of Rhu, and he found himself deposed from the ministry by the

[29] *Ibid.* p. 352.

[30] *Ibid.* p. 384

[31] *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 122–123. Cf. D. Mack, 'Hogg's Religion and "The Confessions of a Justified Sinner",' *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 7, 1970, pp. 272–275.

General Assembly of 1831 through questioning the doctrine of a limited atonement. Like the Marrow men in the previous century, he was charged with teaching universal atonement and assurance as of the essence of the faith. Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, for the most part outside the discipline of the established Church, was probably the first Scottish theologian since the Reformation to launch a frontal attack upon the doctrine of double predestination. His treatise on election is an unfairly neglected work but it makes a number of important suggestions some of which prefigure Karl Barth's treatment of the subject. The first Adam is the reprobate; the second Adam is the elect. God's election rests upon Jesus and is available to all who come to him.

> The decree of election is not a decree compelling man's choice, or determining some individuals for salvation and passing by others, but the expression of God's fixed approbation of those who choose his Spirit, which would work in them that mind which was in Christ, and his fixed determination to make them partakers in Christ's glory.[32]

Yet Erskine's voice was the exception rather than the rule, and it was not until the latter half of the nineteenth-century that major qualifications were made to the allegiance owed to Westminster Calvinism. The first rumblings occurred in the Secession Church when James Morrison was expelled for arguing amongst other things that overseas mission had to be informed by the theological principle that the love of God was directed towards all people and not merely some.[33] These and other considerations eventually caused the United Presbyterian Synod to pass a Declaratory Act in 1870 which stated in its second section:

> the doctrine of the divine decrees, including the doctrine of election to eternal life, is held in connection and harmony with the truth that God is not willing that any should perish, but that

[32]Thomas Erskine, *The Doctrine of Election*, Second Edition, (Edinburgh, 1878), p. 120.

[33]Discussed by A. C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk* (Edinburgh, 1983), pp. 63ff.

> all should come to repentance, and that He has provided a salvation sufficient for all, adapted to all, and offered to all in the Gospel; and also with the responsibility of every man for his dealing with the free and unrestricted offer of eternal life.[34]

A similar statement was approved by the General Assembly of the Free Church in 1892, and these two declaratory acts are now enshrined in the present constitution of the Church of Scotland, together with the so-called 'conscience clause' which allows ministers and elders subscribing to the Westminster Confession liberty of opinion on those matters not affecting the substance of the faith. These Declaratory Acts and the liberty of opinion clause have doubtless served their purpose in enabling many to subscribe to the Confession with a clearer conscience than would otherwise have been possible, but it is hard to resist the view that they were only temporary provisions which created as many problems as they solved. How were the sentiments of the Acts to be made compatible with the teaching of the Confession? How was one to discern the substance of the faith contained in the Confession once its fundamental theological framework had been challenged? As we face the end of the twentieth century, there is apparently no agreement in the Church of Scotland as to an appropriate alternative. The Westminster Confession remains the subordinate standard of faith but it is neither studied nor respected. Our confessional position is in theological disarray, and this can hardly be a satisfactory position given the manifold intellectual problems facing Christian faith in the contemporary world.[35]

Despite the confessional position of the Church, Scottish theology has not stagnated during the present century. Over the last sixty years, it has been heavily, if not uncontroversially, dominated by the influence of Karl Barth, and it is appropriate in this discussion to consider his doctrine of election. Of all Barth's departures from Calvin none is as striking as his

[34] *Practice and Procedure in the Church of Scotland*, ed. J. T. Cox, (Edinburgh, 1976), p. 435.

[35] The Church of Scotland's formal endorsement of the *Short Statement of Faith* (1935) and the *Leuenberg Lutheran-Reformed Concordat* (1973) indicates a further departure from the predestinarian scheme of the Westminster theology.

treatment of predestination. *Kirchliche Dogmatik* II/2 was published in 1942 and, like much Reformation theology, it was produced during a period of political turmoil in Europe. In this treatment of election the supralapsarianism and the emphasis upon divine sovereignty are retained from Reformed orthodoxy but the Christological focus of the doctrine sets it in an entirely fresh light. As with his treatment of every other theological theme, Barth maintains that election has to be controlled by the person and work of Christ. The events which are constitutive for the Christian faith are the decisive index to the character and purposes of God. There can be no attempt therefore to establish in Christian dogmatics a hidden and incomprehensible decree behind the words and works of Christ, a kind of neo-Sabellianism. The New Testament witness to the cosmic significance of Christ entails that he is not merely the one by whom the decrees are executed but, *pace* Calvin, the one in whom they are framed.

> All the dubious features of Calvin's doctrine result from the basic failing that in the last analysis he separates God and Jesus Christ, thinking that what was in the beginning with God must be sought elsewhere than in Jesus Christ.[36]

The declaration of the New Testament is that the love of Jesus and, therefore, of God the Father is directed towards the world. Proclaimed in parable and enacted in his life and death, it is a love that is inclusive rather than exclusive. The crucified and risen Christ is a second Adam who has stood in the place of the rejected sinner, and who thus represents every human person. According to Barth, the incarnate and crucified Word must be thought of as both the electing God and the elected human being. Included in the election of the risen Christ is the election of every man, woman and child. Each individual is thus determined by the love of God, and it is the vocation of the Christian community to live by the Spirit as the witness to that fact in the world. The message proferred by the doctrine of predestination is no longer a mixed message of joy and terror,

[36] *Church Dogmatics* II/2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, 1957), p. 111.

salvation and damnation, but a message that is unequivocally one of comfort and joy. 'The doctrine of election is the sum of the Gospel because of all words that can be said or heard it is the best.'[37]

This statement of the doctrine is deeply attractive to modern Reformed theology and its impact can be seen in the writings of several Scottish theologians.[38] It proclaims the personal love of God which reaches out to the individual wherever he or she is to be found. It is a doctrine which expresses the personhood of God and the value of human persons for an age which threatens to depersonalize both God and humanity. Election witnesses to the sovereign rule of God and to the movement of all life and history to an end that has been foreordained. It is a doctrine which purports to guarantee and not to threaten human freedom, and it facilitates a conception of the Church not as an ark which rescues people from a perishing world but as a community which works within and for the world in anticipation of the coming kingdom.

It would be rash, however, to create the impression that there are no difficulties with this approach and we might mention three objections that have been raised against Barth's repristination of the doctrine.

(a) The problem of what is sometimes called Christomonism refers to the manner in which everything seems to be determined by and for Jesus Christ. There is almost a sense in which the entire history of creation finds its meaning and justification in the inner workings of the life of the Trinity. The world is created, and men and women are redeemed, so that God can be God as Jesus Christ. In an almost Hegelian fashion, the doctrine of election threatens to make the history of the universe nothing more than grist to the self-realisation of the Trinity. This charge of Christomonism can be offset,

[37] *Ibid.* p. 3.

[38] J. K. S. Reid, 'The Office of Christ in Predestination', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 1, 1948, pp. 5–18, 166–183; 'Introduction' to John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (London, 1961), pp. 9–44. T. F. Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ', *Evangelical Quarterly*, 13, 1941, pp. 108–141; 'Universalism or Election', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 2, 1949, pp. 310–318. George Hendry, *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today* (London, 1960), pp. 49–58.

however, by paying attention to Barth's stress upon the freedom of God. For Barth, unlike Hegel, God does not require to elect and create in order to be God. The divine freedom is a persistent theme in his theology, and it underpins the claim that the love of God is both personal and gracious. While the action of God is consistent with and constitutive of the being of God it is nonetheless unconstrained in creation.

(b) A second problem is whether Barth's supralapsarianism can ever do justice to the reality of evil in its natural and moral dimensions. At times, the existence of evil seems to be no more than a necessary by-product of the history of the covenant. The shadowside of creation is a feature of the beauty and order of God's handiwork, while the reality of evil (nothingness) is a necessary, negative consequence of everything to which God has said 'Yes'.

> In this sense God is and is not; He wills and does not will. And for this reason He intends and ordains that the object of His love and the witness to His glory in the universe which He has created should testify in a twofold manner – he should testify to His Yes and to what He wills, and he should also testify to His No and to what He does not will . . . In this way there may be manifest to him the divine glory.[39]

There is still too much here of the older supralapsarian idea that evil must be built into the structure of creation in order to reflect the divine glory. The problem is surely too vast and intractable to be resolved by this metaphysical gambit, and the Bible itself seems uninterested in explaining evil in this or any other way. A greater silence on this point may be called for along with an emphasis, such as is found in Moltmann, upon the suffering of God and the hope of the defeat of evil.

(c) A further problem that Barth's doctrine of election has encountered lies in its incipient universalism. It is curious that in modern theology many of the older debates about predestination are now being fought over the issue of universal salvation. If all are from eternity elect in Christ, does this not imply that everyone must willy nilly be gathered in at the end?

[39]Op. cit. p. 141.

It has been argued that this fails to do justice to the reality of evil, to human freedom to refuse as well as to accept, and to the clear message of Scripture. Barth denies that he is committed to a necessary universalism which evacuates history and human freedom of their significance. The freedom of God cannot be compromised and it remains a possibility that some may place themselves outwith the divine grace. The eschatological possibility of rejecting one's election, it would seem, cannot be excluded.[40]

In the light of the first and third of these criticisms, I would plea for further examination of the question of human freedom and contingency in Reformed theology. The Westminster Confession teaches that our voluntary actions serve the decrees of God and in this respect there is more than a hint of fatalism in its theology. In the moral psychology that here seems to be presupposed, a voluntary action is one which is explained by factors which are internal to the agent's constitution. In this way, it is entirely accounted for by the sum total of dispositions internal to an agent prior to the moment of each mental and physical act. The notion that there is some extra ingredient called 'freedom of the will', which enables the agent to retain the possibility of choosing otherwise, is deemed irrelevant and illusory. Such an account of the will would not render action free but only random and indeterminate.

This account of human liberty is perfectly consistent with the Westminster doctrine of predestination. The absence of anything random or indeterminate in the universe enables the decrees to be perfectly executed by voluntary and contingent secondary causes. Everything that happens does so in accordance with the prior determination and foreknowledge of God. In this theological scheme the concept of 'freedom' is usually reserved to describe the quality of life in which the Holy Spirit enables the believer to will what is truly good. Freedom is thus restored through grace, and it marks a life which is lived in obedience and gratitude to the Word of God.

The complaint against this theory is that it is unable to accommodate the sense of freedom that accompanies much

[40]For Barth's repudiation of the charge of universalism see ibid. pp. 417ff.

human activity. The notion that immediately prior to action we are able to choose between alternatives cannot be made sense of here.[41] Voluntary action is simply internal determinism as opposed to external coercion, and this is thrown into sharp relief by the manner in which it can be made compatible with God's immutable decrees and foreknowledge. We can see clearly what is missing on this account when we realise that the most significant choice a person can make in this life is already made in the primordial decree. The freedom involved in the decision to say 'Yes' or 'No' to God is one that is wholly illusory since God has already determined what that decision shall be. (This freedom need not be construed as an innate ability to hear and to acknowledge the Word of God. It can be understood as a gift that is given by the Holy Spirit who creates the conditions for genuine decision before the Word.[42]) If we are to prevent theology evacuating human choices of their deepest significance we shall need to find a more adequate understanding of human freedom. An alternative notion of radical choice, while not exhausting the theological meaning of freedom, requires to be accommodated if theology is not to lapse into fatalism.

For Barth, the providence of God does not threaten freedom but actually creates the conditions under which it may be realised. There is thus coincidence rather than competition between divine grace and human freedom. The divine rule guarantees rather than undermines freedom. This is a step in the right direction but other remarks made by Barth might lead us to wonder whether we have escaped from a theory of voluntary action which is anything more than a concealed form of soft determinism.[43] The claim that the reign of God is a fatherly reign and that the election of grace determines every person does not in itself bestow upon the creature the element of choice that is crucial to the way we think, speak, act and understand ourselves. The theologian who insists that such choice is trivial may need to recall that it is precisely this

[41]This is a standard libertation objection to Hume's theory of free will. Cf. Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London, 1977), pp. 151ff.

[42]Cf. T. F. Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ', op. cit. pp. 123–124.

[43]E.g. *Church Dogmatics* III/3, ed. G. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, 1960), pp. 118ff.

element of choice which is said to have brought about the creation of the world!

A coherent libertarian account of choice is notoriously elusive, yet it can be approached negatively by arguing that an action is a free action if it has no complete explanation in terms of the agent's personality, brain-state or genetic make-up. It is a free action only if we can say that even in the presence of these conditioning factors the agent could have acted otherwise. If a choice is fully determined by psychological, physiological or theological conditions, then at the time of acting I am not free. This notion of freedom seems to be necessary for our sense of responsibility, and our intuition that our actions are genuinely our own. Freedom, says the later Sartre, is 'the small movement which makes of a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him.'[44]

A theology which admits this as one ingredient of freedom will need to work hard with traditional conceptions of divine providence, foreknowledge and grace. Rather than presiding over a plan immutable in every detail, providence might better be conceived of as the infinite resourcefulness of God in dealing with human creatures in a manner that is in accordance with the purposes disclosed and fulfilled in Christ. Moreover, divine foreknowledge may need to be abridged in the name of divine love and patience.[45] An element of improvisation in God's dealings with the world may indeed by a necessary feature of the love which is disclosed in the vicissitudes of Israel and which allows itself to be nailed to a cross of wood. At the same time, attention to human choice as accompanied and emboldened by the sovereign activity of God is the best response to recent charges that the concept of divine sovereignty is catastrophic for a nuclear and ecological age.[46]

[44]Cited by David Wiggins, 'Towards a Reasonable Libertarianism', *Essays on the Freedom of Action*, ed. T. Honderich (London, 1973), p. 53.

[45]Cf. J. R. Lucas, 'Foreknowledge and the Vulnerability of God', *The Philosophy in Christianity*, ed. G. Vesey, (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 119–128.

[46]E.g. Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (London, 1987), pp. 16ff. The claim that the sovereignty of God enables rather than defeats human endeavour is argued by Frederick Sontag, 'Metaphorical Non-Sequitur', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 44, 1991, pp. 1–19.

The danger in this approach is that it may lapse into a form of synergism which will lose sight of the preeminence of grace and the divine over-ruling of human affairs. One way of responding to this is to assert the trinitarian, and not merely the binitarian, dimension of election.[47] A stronger emphasis upon the concursive activity of the Spirit working through and upon human choices should enable us to counter the charge that the history of creation is no more than the temporal unfolding of a timeless plan, immutable in every detail, without requiring the abandonment of the notion of God's sovereignty. Attention to the creative involvement of the Spirit within the world should avoid both fatalism and randomness in our understanding of the direction in which human life and history lead. These are only programmatic suggestions but they indicate the ways in which contemporary Reformed theology might produce a more adequate account of providence, grace and divine action while seeking to remain faithful to the better insights of the Barthian doctrine of election. If predestination is to remain a credible theological notion in Scotland outside the shrinking citadels of Federal Calvinism, it will need to affirm with greater vigour that human freedom and love are made universally possible by God's grace.

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[47]Colin Gunton, appealing to Edward Irving, argues that a stronger account of the Holy Spirit's activity in the present can offset a rigid determinism on the one hand, and a capricious subjectivism on the other. 'The Triune God and the Freedom of the Creature', *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, ed. S. W. Sykes (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 63ff.